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SUBJECT: INDO-BANGLADESHI RELATIONS SOUR

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Classified By: Charge Bob Blake, for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Relations between India and Bangladesh have soured since the April 16 killing of a BSF guard along the India-Bangladesh border, with increased concerns about illegal migration and terrorist groups along the border and calls for a more aggressive Indian policy towards the GOB. At the one year anniversary of the UPA government, most experts consider GOI policy towards Bangladesh as one of the few weak spots in an otherwise impressive year in foreign policy. As the GOI tries to keep ties with Dhaka on an even keel, we are hearing more criticism of the GOI for lacking a comprehensive policy to deal effectively with the GOB. A meeting between the Foreign Ministers planned for the end of June and the rescheduling of the SAARC Summit in November offer opportunities to improve ties. End Summary.

Bangladesh: Weak Point of Indian Foreign Policy

¶2. (U) The recent one year anniversary "report cards" for the UPA government gave the GOI a low grade on its policy towards Bangladesh, with most observers naming it as one of the weakest areas of performance during a year of otherwise impressive foreign policy gains. Ambassador G. Parthasarathy, former High Commissioner to Pakistan, gave the GOI an "C minus or F" grade in this area. "Hindustan Times" Editor Vir Sanghvi called Bangladesh one of two "areas of concern." He worried that India has neglected Bangladesh because New Delhi is "obsessed with Pakistan," but that it should be more proactive because if Bangladesh fails as a state, "much of its population would end up on our doorstep."

More Lows than Highs

¶3. (C) The Ministry of Defense voiced growing concern over Bangladesh in its 2004-2005 annual report released in early May, which criticized the GOB for being "insensitive and unresponsive" to India's security concerns. Increasing political violence in Bangladesh and tussles along the border are leading many experts to conclude that relations have hit at a low point. Anil Kamboj, previously an Additional Deputy Inspector General in the BSF, concluded recently that relations, especially along the border, have deteriorated over the last 10 years, to the point where "cooperation across the board is impossible." Former Deputy National Security Advisor Satish Chandra told visiting House International Relations Committee Senior Staffer James McCormick on June 1 that Bangladesh should be India's "number one concern today."

¶4. (C) In response to these concerns, Bangladesh High Commission First Secretary Bodiruzzaman recently observed to Poloff that the relationship between the two countries has always been one of "highs and lows" and that these problems should "not hamper bilateral relations," complaining that the "border mars the situation when we have worked so hard" to improve over the last 2-3 years." Despite these assurances, the Indian newsweekly "Outlook" magazine recently reported that a Bangladesh Foreign Ministry Committee headed by barrister Ziaur Rahman of the BNP described relations "as the worst-ever since the birth of the country in 1971" and blamed Bangladesh Foreign Minister Morshed Khan for the souring in relations.

Continuing Border Tensions

¶5. (C) These recent developments take place against a backdrop of concerns along the border. Despite the presence of border guards on both sides and fencing along most areas, the porous border, which includes the states of West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram, remains a day-to-day irritant in Indo-Bangla relations. Assam Governor Ajai Singh sparked controversy on May 20 when he claimed that "up to 6,000 illegal infiltrators were entering Assam and other states in the region daily." However, the 2001 census of Assam showed a normal growth curve suggesting at most modest emigration from Bangladesh in the 1991-2001 period. Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi refuted the numbers, but estimates of the number of illegal migrants range from five million from the Union Minister of State for Home Prakash Jaiswal to 12-18

million from MEA Bangladesh Desk Officer Puneet Kandal. The Bangladesh High Commission's Bodiruzzaman admitted that the GOB "can't deny all immigration," but considered these figures, "like all news about Bangladesh, exaggerated for domestic consumption".

16. (C) In response to India's complaint about the recent death of the BSF guard, Bodiruzzaman countered that loss of life is heavier on the Bangladesh side, and that these deaths are never reported in India, observing that after the April incident, 11-12 Bangladeshi citizens were killed. In 2004, BSF guards killed approximately 80 Bangladeshi citizens, he claimed, whereas there have already been 47 deaths in 2005, all unreported in Indian media. Some press reports claimed that the BSF guard killed in April was armed and within Bangladeshi territory when he was killed, although others reported that he was lured in by the BDR in a case of a cooperative illegal racket gone wrong. Masud Bin Momem, the Acting Bangladeshi High Commissioner in New Delhi, stressed to Poloff that despite the large contribution Bangladeshis make to India's economy, Bangladesh is "blamed for everything." He worried about an anti-Bangladesh backlash, and pointed to the recent controversy over the potential closure of Mumbai dance bars as an example of India blaming his country for its own larger morality problem. Of the bar girls in Mumbai, some 30 percent are suspected to be illegal Bangladeshis, virtually all of whom were likely trafficked for sexual or labor exploitation.

17. (C) Frustrated with the rising number of Bangladeshi migrants living in India, a group of young Assamese men called the "Chiring Chaporri Yuva Mancha" ("Youth Forum from Chiring Chaporri") on May 12 reportedly forced out up to 15,000 suspected illegal migrants from the Dibrugarh and neighboring areas. The Congress-controlled Assam government was reportedly aware of the movement and has taken no action. This vigilante gang blamed "vote bank politics" for the lack of deportations. Dr. Prakash Singh, a former BSF Director General, adding that "the state government is not taking any action to detect or deport illegal migrants and Prakash Singh worried that these evictions could get out of hand and lead to an "explosive situation."

Short Term Fencing Measures

18. (C) After the BSF official's death in April, BSF DG Moosahary visited the region and announced plans to beef up fencing in the Northeast section with double-layer barbed wire on concrete posts, with the 14-yard gap between the barbed wire filled with concertina coils, similar to the Indo-Pak border on the Western Sector. The BSF was also reportedly considering electrification of the fencing in the "busiest" sections in Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya. Soon after the incident, however, the Calcutta-based "Telegraph" reported that Home Minister Shivraj Patil suspended erection of fences within 150 yards of the international border. In 212 contentious patches, villages sit along the border, and if fenced over 150 yards away, 62,000 Indians on the Bangladeshi side would be fenced out. According to the Indian media, Bangladesh has objected to fencing so near the border, citing the 1975 Indo-Bangladesh Border guidelines that prohibit either country from building "defensive structures" within 150 yards. GOI officials claim the fence is "not a defensive border" and assert that it is Delhi's sovereign right to build the fence.

GOI Policy

19. (C) In a recent meeting, MEA Director for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and the Maldives TS Sandhu stressed to Poloff that the GOI had a "clear policy of trying to engage Bangladesh." Noting that "if India and Pakistan are engaging, then why not Bangladesh," he said the concern was to engage the leadership rather than try to "fence them in." He argued that engagement was most important on the economic side, especially regarding gas, an area where the GOI has "made efforts to give Dhaka economic concessions." PM Manmohan Singh repeated this emphasis on diplomacy over punishment when he recently responded to complaints of a "soft policy" saying that "If Bangladesh is not friendly, it does not mean that India should use a big stick against them" and that "New Delhi decided to go the diplomatic route." Semu Bhatt of the Mumbai-based Strategic Foresight Group agreed with this approach, commenting that it was the responsibility of the larger, more influential country not to use its power to escalate the situation.

Criticism From All Sides

10. (C) India-based experts assert that GOI engagement with Bangladesh has been slim, and that India does not have an effective, developed strategy to deal with its neighbor, and offer a variety of reasons why. Dr. Rajesh Kharat, professor at the University of Mumbai, bluntly called Bangladesh

India's "soft corner," saying that India has "no proactive policy" because they have been "too concerned with Pakistan and Nepal to care." Rashid Alvi, a young Muslim MP from Uttar Pradesh, complained that "Bangladesh is nothing" and yet when incidents arise, the "GOI can't do anything other than call the embassy." He added that India is "bound to be soft" because West Bengal has a significant Muslim population, which opposes stronger action against Bangladesh.

Dr. Prakash Singh, who led the BSF on this border for many years, observed that border incidents continue because of Delhi's "weak government." Terrorism hawk Ajai Sahni, speculated that the GOI may be soft because it fears "the Awami League (AL) would suffer from anti-Indian rhetoric" and a policy that hurts AL electoral chances is not in Delhi's self-interest.

¶11. (C) While Delhi-based analysts have been ringing the alarm bells and criticizing GOI policy, few have offered solutions. If the entire border were fenced off, many experts believe this would slow the flow of migrants but not solve India's Bangladesh woes. Much of the migration to India occurs at existing legal transit points facilitated by bribes on both sides of the border, and would therefore be unaffected by greater fencing. Anil Dutta from the Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation pointed out that many Bangladeshis illegally cross over the Bramaputra and Meghna rivers along the border. The GOI has constructed a floating border post, but it has not been permitted to come down the river. Sahni observed that a continuous border would "significantly slow" the number of migrants and that putting off the fencing in these areas is the "classical policy of appeasement" towards Bangladesh. He urged the GOI to take a "stronger line on Bangladesh," characterizing GOI policy as "weaning away problems with Bangladesh through economics and aid," which is "oversimplified and not working". He recommends that India "devise a series of coercive strategies that will force the GOB to adhere to minimal norms of international conduct" such as undermining the Bangladesh economy, isolating it internationally, responding to incidents with immediate and harsh punitive action and hardening India's military posture.

Chances To Improve Ties

¶12. (C) Responding to the negative report cards, MEA's Sandhu acknowledged to Poloff that the GOI has noted public concern for a more proactive policy and agreed to the first meeting in two years between the Foreign Secretaries, likely to take place on June 20-21. In addition to the fencing predicament and the need to discuss illegal immigration, the "Telegraph" recently expected Delhi to raise cooperation on Northeast insurgents in Bangladesh. Bodiruzzaman suggested that Dhaka will raise the idea of Coordinated Patrolling on the border to decrease tension. However, Pallavi Mutalik, a researcher at the Strategic Foresight Group, thought that "distrust on both sides runs too high for this to be a viable solution."

¶13. (C) The GOI cancellation of the February SAARC meeting was a response to both the coup in Nepal and the security situation in Bangladesh (Reftel). Bodiruzzaman indicated that this characterization caused further strain on the relationship, but that the GOB welcomes the meeting, tentatively expected this fall. The GOB proposed two sets of dates in September and November, with India agreeing to November 13-14. Bodiruzzaman remarked that it was "very funny" that India has now agreed to the meeting, noting that neither the "security situation in Bangladesh nor the coup in Nepal has improved." Instead it is a sign that the GOI sees the SAARC meetings as a much needed chance to improve ties with its neighbors. Sandhu agreed that "security concerns had not all been addressed" but that the GOI "didn't want to stand in the way of SAARC."

Comment

¶14. (C) GOI policy towards Dhaka has been a tough balancing act, exacerbated by the MEA's focus on Pakistan and Nepal. Although the GOI does need to step up engagement, a more punitive response, as suggested by hardliners, could be counterproductive. GOI officials worry that if their measures are too harsh, they could contribute to a "failed state," which would only increase migration into India and provide more room for insurgent groups to train on Bangladeshi soil. While New Delhi dithers, many Indians along the border are organizing and pushing suspected migrants out of the country -- with no apparent repercussions.

¶15. (C) Our Delhi-based interlocutors are increasingly concerned about governance issues in Bangladesh, and consider this an area where India and the US might usefully cooperate on policy. They stress, however, that the GOB is very sensitive to being "pushed around" by Washington, which would

provoke heightened anti-US rhetoric, which is often linked with anti-Indian rhetoric, especially in the run up to 2006 elections. As India is forced to focus more attention on Bangladesh, the USG may have an opportunity to use the model of our cooperation with Nepal and work with the GOI to try and counter the security concerns coming from this important neighbor.

**¶16. (U) This cable was coordinated with ConGen Calcutta.
BLAKE**